

File manager bombs in practice

Anyone who has a hard disk knows how easy it is to lose track of files in the subdirectory underbrush.

With dozens of directories and hundreds of file names, it's often difficult to find your way. One route around this problem is offered by a new program called ViewLink.

ViewLink, for \$149.95, comes from Traveling Software Inc., the same company that makes the popular computer-to-computer file transfer program LapLink.

The new program is billed as "the first associative access manager for DOS." It claims to let you build an overlay of meaningful file associations. This sounds good in theory, but bombs in practice.

Here are some of its claimed features:

- ViewLink is supposed to group data files together by application. A two-column "point-and-shoot" menu lets you first pick your "view" which could be a tag for an application, like Word Star or 1-2-3. Once the application is picked, associated data files fill



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the right-hand column. Highlighting a data file starts the application and opens that file.

- It's supposed to cross-link data files. Using the same ViewLink menu, you build associations with files from more than one application. An example of such a view would be a project name, say Big Project, listed in the left menu column. When Big Project is highlighted, all files used to store data or create reports — perhaps Word Star, Lotus 1-2-3 or Harvard Graphics — would be displayed in the right column. Picking one of the data files also starts the appropriate application program.

- Finally, it's supposed to add notes to files. As an aid to remembering file contents, files listed in the ViewLink menu can be labeled

by a short sentence instead of the file name DOS allows. Once a file is highlighted, even longer descriptions can be entered or accessed.

The main problem is that the overlay of file relationships can quickly get exceedingly complex, making every one of the above features difficult to implement.

For many users a DOS shell program that allows menu selection is insulation enough from the raw DOS command line. ViewLink goes beyond a shell program by creating a "web" of relationships among files. But instead of easier manipulation of files, I found myself hopelessly entangled by this very web.

While the program makes much of the relationships it builds among other programs, it leaves out a vital piece of information from its display: the DOS path for a given file. I tried to link two files with the same name to the same view. ViewLink seemed to allow this, but on checking its menu, only one was listed. Without seeing any path information I couldn't tell which of the two was actually link-

ed. I think this is too much insulation from the ways of DOS.

On the upside, ViewLink will run on networks, and here it may prove more useful. When you have multiple users and multiple directories it doesn't take long to create a blizzard of files. If a network administrator learned this program and showed others how to create linkages, ViewLink might bring order to a heavily used server.

- The bottom line: This complicated program will have you thinking DOS commands aren't so bad after all. Many programs have tried to soften the contact between DOS and mere humans. But here there is just too much effort asked of the average user to learn and maintain this different approach.

To obtain ViewLink contact Traveling Software Inc., 18702 North Creek Parkway, Bothell, Wash. 98011.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity.